



March 13, 2013

TESTIMONY REGARDING EAA LEGISLATION, HB 4369

AFT Michigan thanks the House Education Committee for this opportunity to testify. However, AFT Michigan respectfully opposes HB 4369, the legislation that is before you.

Let me say at the outset that AFT Michigan has a long history of supporting policies aimed at closing achievement gaps. These policies are set forth in its Pre K-12 Education Platform. To this end, AFT Michigan is committed to advocating for policies that identify and address characteristics of underperforming schools and invests in their improvement. Our states most needy students, those from impoverished families or those who have fallen behind academically, deserve meaningful interventions that address factors that lead to low performance at the school level.

Unfortunately, HB 4369 is not an approach to school reform that will improve schools for these students. First, there is no evidence that a state centralized school district leads to student achievement gains. Furthermore, there is nothing in HB 4369 that describes a solutions based approach. It merely operates under the assumption that somehow plucking schools out of their local districts will inherently lead to higher quality educational experiences. Turning a school around requires examining its operations, curriculum and culture, analyzing the findings and then developing a meaningful school improvement plan. Underlying this bill is the assumption that if a school hasn't shown improvement over time, after being forced to choose from one of four underfunded reform models, the fix is placing that school in an Achievement Authority.

This bill also assumes that the collective bargaining process is always a primary reason for poor student performance. In our state's highest performing schools there are collective bargaining agreements, and teachers and other school employees are part of MPSERS. Collective bargaining and belonging to MPSERS clearly are not the cause of poor performance. Persistently lowest performing schools need policies that are actually aimed at improving student learning, not ones that do not begin by diagnosing the causes of poor performance. For example, an elementary school that is responsible for educating high proportion of English Language Learners will require different reforms than a high school with a high proportion of students who have other kinds of special needs. This bill does not address the problems in those schools.

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At the very least HB 4369 should require that prior to being placed into the Achievement Authority, schools should be audited in order to identify target areas for reform. This would show consideration for the specific obstacles that impede performance at a particular school.

In this version of HB 4369, a school could be identified as lowest performing, implement a reform model that shows improvement and still be placed in the EAA if those gains don't push them out of the bottom five percent in subsequent years. This means that even though interventions could be showing signs of success, we would cease them.

This bill actually undercuts communities by replacing local control of school districts with an unproven state centralized decision-making structure. Doing so ignores community voice and local participation in the school improvement process and disrupts the continuity and stability of local districts.

If we are serious about improving the bottom 5% of our schools, we should determine if establishing a statewide Achievement Authority actually works. Scaling the EAA up because the district showed gains after 6 months on an internal, non-comparative, single assessment is haphazard and is not data driven decision-making. The fact is that the EAA in Detroit has not been around long enough to draw conclusions about its impact. Meaningful data just doesn't exist yet. At this point we can't honestly conclude that this policy works. We should evaluate the EAA's effectiveness before scaling it up. This means comparing similar student data measures between EAA and non-EAA schools over time in a controlled study to determine if the EAA is effective and then make policy decisions accordingly. It is essential that if this bill does move forward it include a way of monitoring whether the EAA is effective overtime.

AFT Michigan asks the House Committee on Education not to move forward on HB 4369 and instead advance policies that will improve the quality of education for students by addressing the school level factors that may lead to poor performance. Simply transplanting a school into a state operated district won't inherently improve it. The research is clear: successful and lasting reforms address instructional content, invest teachers and community members and provides students with well-rounded programs of academic and enrichment opportunities. Real reform includes building a strong and positive school climate, and provides wrap around supports to help ensure that basic needs are met. There is nothing in this bill that directly calls for these strategies. Instead HB 4369 just asks students and families to trust that a state centralized school district will be more effective then one that is locally controlled.